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Racial/Colonial Genocide and the “Neoliberal Academy”: In Excess of a Problematic

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My place of employment reflects how the U.S. academy remains constituted by its gendered racist, apartheid, colonial foundations. As several students and colleagues remind me, the desecration of Indian burial grounds has guided the construction and expansion of the land grant institution at which I work, the University of California, Riverside—that is, desecration is not an incidental and fleeting *moment* in the campus’s creation, it is the *continual condition* of UCR’s existence as such.¹ Second, recent UCR police practices are saturated with antiblack racism and “racial profiling,” landmarked by a set of early-2000s exchanges between renowned African American historian Sterling Stuckey and then Chancellor Raymond Orbach. Stuckey detailed the UCRPD’s yearlong harassment of one black graduate student in particular (detained multiple times by campus police *while walking to the library*), remarking that “circumstances at UCR [have] made it impossible for me to go on recruiting black graduate students.”²

These local examples express the academy’s paradigmatic ordering of bodies, vulnerabilities, and intellectual hierarchies. That is, such everyday dehumanization illustrates the systemic logics, institutional techniques, rhetorics, and epistemologies of violence and power that undergird the academy’s racial and colonial foundations even—especially—as they resurface in our current working and thinking conditions. These dehumanizing violences exceed the effects of the academy’s neoliberalization; they require an urgent, strategic, mutual centering of the analytics of racial/colonial genocide. Framed in the long historical scope of modernity, racial/colonial genocide is a logic of human extermination that encompasses extended temporal, cultural, biological, and territorial dimensions:³ the mind-boggling body counts associated with commonly recognized “genocides” are but one fragment of a larger historical regime that requires the perpetual social neutralization (if not actual elimination) of targeted populations as (white, patriarchal) modernity’s *premise of*

historical-material continuity. This is why Indian reservations, the U.S. prison and criminalization regime, and even Arizona's ban on ethnic studies need to be critically addressed through a genocide analytic as well as through focused critiques of neoliberalism's cultural and economic structures: the logics of social neutralization (civil death, land expropriation, white supremacist curricular enforcement) always demonstrate the *capacity* (if not the actually existing political will and institutional inclination) to effectively exterminate people from social spaces and wipe them out of the social text.

To appropriate a well-known phrase, I'm advancing an abolitionist praxis without guarantees—of either victory or survival. Here “abolitionist” invokes and identifies the genealogies of freedom struggle that emerge in direct, radical confrontation with genocidal and protogenocidal regimes: lineages of political-intellectual creativity and organized, collective (and at times revolutionary) insurgency that have established the foundations on which people have relied to build life-sustaining movements to liberate themselves from racial chattel enslavement and its extended aftermath, colonialist conquest and contemporary settler states, apartheid (Jim Crow), the prison industrial complex, militarized border policing, and so forth. If the ethical imperative is to abolish (rather than merely render temporarily survivable) the social logics and institutionalized systems of violence that are mutually structured by the genealogies of neoliberalism *and* racial/colonial genocide, then there are places of collective power that can be cherished at the same time that they are critiqued and transformed.

For better or worse, the U.S. academy (both the specific institutional site of the college/university and the broader, shifting political-intellectual terrains of “the academy”) may be one fruitful place from which to catalyze this work. Activisms that form in confrontation with the academy's long historical complicities in racial/colonial genocide might be understood within an “urgency imperative” that seeks to denaturalize and ultimately dismantle the conditions in which these systems of massive violence are reproduced.⁴ There are thriving circuits of radical thought that aim to do just that: for example, the very presence of anticolonialism, black radicalism, Native American feminism, and prison abolitionism as recognizable streams of scholarly and pedagogical labor within institutional spaces—and more importantly, *the vibrant and urgent ways in which many (though still far too few) people inhabit these spaces*—has become a matter of life and death in more ways than one. The capacities to produce such scholarship (including the creation of counterarchives, vital epistemological and theoretical tools, course syllabi, and mentorship) have been hard-won by multiple histories of liberation struggle and intense intellectual innovation, and cohere in the academy through affinities of ideas, analytics, and scholars whose

work is mutually nourishing and critically enabling. The “activist” importance of these circuits cannot be overstated; at their best, their political-intellectual work is engaged in something resembling a collective standoff with the most mundanely violent forms of dehumanization, humiliation, displacement, and immobilization. The interrogations are grave: What are the ethical and political implications of chronicling the racial-sexual violence of U.S. lynching in continuity with less spectacular (and differently gendered) forms of antiblack state and state-condoned violence such as police abuse, welfare policy, and school segregation? To what degree have the critical renarrations of the U.S. racial colonialist project—from the Americas to the Philippines—enabled a productive denaturing of the violent, teleological mythologies of liberal white humanism, multiculturalist democracy, and national progress (all of which require a code of silence on the actual existence of colonized peoples on U.S. sovereign and occupied soil)?⁵ These are just two examples in which dedicated activist scholarly labor has uncovered the unexceptional normal of genocidal and protogenocidal social logics.

Such intellectual practices can *renarrate* racial terror and misery—the forms of suffering endemic to multicultural civil society. Within this collective work, there is possibility for effective (though never permanent) denaturalizations—and politicizations—of the forms of human suffering, entrapment, and vulnerability that are otherwise routinely embedded in the current world’s institutional protocols, and death-inducing organization of resources.

In such instances, radical intellectuals’ inhabitation of existing institutional sites can enable both ethical opposition to structures of domination and creative knowledge production that strives to glimpse the historical possibilities that are always just on the other side of terror and degradation. Intellectuals engaged in such projects are always more than “academics,” in the sense that their scholarly engagement is not secured by the academy proper. This expansive grounding is an “antidisciplinarity” of a certain kind: if what animates their intellectual work is what I have tentatively named an abolitionist desire, such radical intellectuals always understand themselves to be working in alien (if not hostile) territory. *The academy is never home*: some of us are subject to eviction and evisceration, alongside the surveillance, discipline, and low-intensity punishment that accrues to those of us who try to build modalities of sustenance and reproduction within liberationist genealogies, particularly when we are working and studying in colleges and universities.⁶

I am undecided as to whether the university is capable or worthy of being “transformed” from its dominant historical purposes, or if it ought to be completely abolished. For now, I am interested in the radical creativity that can

come from the standoff position in-and-of-itself. Such a position reveals that the fundamental problem is not that some are excluded from the hegemonic centers of the academy but that the university (as a specific institutional site) and academy (as a shifting material network) themselves cannot be disentangled from the long historical apparatuses of genocidal and protogenocidal social organization. Placed in the context of the United States, we can see that (1) genocidal methodologies and logics have always constituted the *academically facilitated* inception of a hemispheric “America,” and (2) genocidal technologies are the lifeblood of national reproduction across its distended temporalities and geographies. The recent flourishing of scholarship that rehistoricizes regimes of incarceration, war, sexuality, settler-colonialist power, and gendered racist state violence—including much of the work that has recently appeared in this very journal—constitutes a radical reproach of institutional multiculturalism and liberal pluralism. The point to be amplified is that multiculturalism and pluralism are essential to *both* the contemporary formation of neoliberalism and the historical distensions of racial/colonial genocide.⁷

It is for this reason that I do not find the analytics of neoliberalism to be sufficient for describing the conditions of political work within the U.S. academy today. It is not just different structures of oppressive violence that radical scholars are trying to make legible, it is violence of a certain depth, with specific and morbid implications for some peoples’ *future existence as such*. If we can begin to acknowledge this fundamental truth—that genocide *is this place* (the American academy and, in fact, America itself)—then our operating assumptions, askable questions, and scholarly methods will need to transform. At a moment of historical emergency, we might find principled desperation within intellectual courage.

Notes

1. It is common sense among California Indian students, colleagues, and coworkers at UCR that the campus *is desecrated land*. While I have discussed this condition with many, I am especially grateful to Robert Perez, Kehaulani Vaughn, and Charles Sepulveda.
2. Correspondence from Sterling Stuckey to Raymond Orbach, June 30, 2001 (in author’s possession).
3. See Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8.4 (2006): 387–409. Here, I view Wolfe’s notion of a “logic of elimination” as enabling a robust conceptualization of racial/colonial genocide as constitutive of the historical present tense.
4. See João Costa Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008). I invoke Vargas’s “urgency imperative” to suggest that the specificities of antiblack genocide can both guide and alter those forms of praxis that mean to radically confront other genocidal logics and genealogies, including those of people not of African descent.

5. See David Stannard's discussion of the roles of “myth” and “mythology” in the conquest of the Americas in *American Holocaust: the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13–14.
6. For this reason, I would resist the idea that radical thinkers should articulate themselves as “Occupy-ing” the academy or university. Even as I support the spirit of insurgency that spins the “Occupy” movement forward, I find too much of its language fails to account for already existing conditions of colonialist occupation and displacement tethered to the making of modern white racial humanity.
7. I am indebted to the work of Ruth Gilmore (*Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007]), Jodi Melamed (*Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007]), and the late great Clyde Woods (*In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions* [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010]) for challenging and developing my thinking in this vein.